A PREVIEW OF

“It Looked Great On Paper”

By Andrea Belk Olson

Somewhere in your organization, a strategy is dying quietly. Not from a bad idea. From a thousand small, reasonable decisions nobody thought to connect.

This is a preview, not the playbook. Here’s the diagnosis — the book is the cure.

THE GAP NOBODY BUDGETS FOR

Two years ago, 74% of employees said they were willing to support a major change initiative. Today, that number is 43%. In the same window, roughly two-thirds of strategic initiatives never deliver what they promised.

Leadership didn’t get lazier. The plans didn’t get worse. Something is happening between the strategy meeting and the Tuesday stand-up — a gap most organizations don’t even know they’re budgeting for.

I call it Execution Drift: the slow, compounding distance between what leadership intends and what actually happens on the ground. It doesn’t announce itself. Nobody wakes up and decides to abandon the strategy. It drifts — one softened tradeoff, one unspoken exception, one “let’s revisit that” at a time. By the time it’s visible, it’s already expensive.

Most leaders go looking for one cause. A weak manager. A resistant team. A bad quarter. They rarely find it, because it isn’t there. Drift isn’t caused by one decision. It’s caused by patterns — and patterns have names.

THREE PATTERNS YOU’LL RECOGNIZE

Idea Bombing. The constant stream of “quick” new initiatives from leadership, each one an unspoken permission slip to drop whatever was already in motion. One executive I worked with described it exactly: “It became an excuse to drop everything else on their plate.” Teams don’t finish work. They wait for the next idea to make finishing unnecessary.

Clouding. Strategic language so abstract it means nothing until someone downstream is forced to invent a meaning for it. “We spent three months ‘driving synergies’ before anyone admitted we had no idea what that meant.” By the time the fog clears, the team has usually built something nobody asked for.

Sunshining. The quiet punishment of bad news dressed as optimism. "I tried telling my VP that customers were confused, not delighted. She smiled and said, 'Let's focus on the wins.'" Say that enough times, and people stop telling you the truth at all — not out of malice, but self-preservation.

None of these are personality flaws. They're incentives, working exactly as built. And they spread fast: they reward the wrong behavior, they destabilize the systems everyone relies on, and eventually, they teach your best people to stop trying — and your best people leave first.

Here's what's unsettling. Most leaders can see these patterns in their own organization. Seeing them has never been the hard part. Stopping them is. (There's much more about this in the book)

WHY KNOWING ISN'T ENOUGH

If awareness were the fix, Execution Drift wouldn't exist. Leaders aren't blind to it — they can usually describe their own organization's version of it in detail. And it persists anyway.

That's because the behaviors driving drift — jumping in, smoothing things over, rewarding whoever moves fastest — are the same behaviors that got most leaders promoted in the first place. Correcting them doesn't just require insight. It requires giving up the exact instincts that built your credibility.

What actually breaks the pattern isn't a longer offsite, or a more inspiring mission statement. It's infrastructure — something specific enough to act on, and durable enough to survive contact with a bad Monday.

THE ANTIDOTE

In the book, I call that infrastructure a Steering Guide. It has three layers: a Guiding Principle that filters every decision, Core Commitments that turn that principle into something verifiable, and Supporting Actions that make it something any employee can actually practice — not aspire to.

That's as far as I'll take you here. The mechanics of how those three layers are built, tested, and made impossible to ignore — the part that actually stops the drift — is the rest of the book.

WHAT YOU'RE ACTUALLY DECIDING

You already know if your organization is drifting. You've watched a strategy get "relaunched" for the third time. You've sat in a room where everyone nodded, and no one changed anything. You've watched a good employee quit quietly, for reasons that were never really about money.

It isn't your people, and it isn't your plan. It's the gap between the two — and it's measurable, and it's fixable, and it's not going to close itself.

It Looked Great On Paper is where the rest of this gets built.

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